Śūdras & Sanātan

Dhruv Agrawal

What is Varṇa?

In the *Śrīmad Bhagavadgītā* (4.13), Bhagavān says to Arjuna:

"Cāturvarṇyaṁ mayā sṛṣṭaṁ guṇakarmavibhāgaśaḥ"

which means: *“O Arjuna! I have created the four varṇas — brāhmaṇa, kṣatriya, vaiśya, and śūdra, based on their guṇas (qualities) and karma.”*

Here, the word karma, loosely translated as "actions" or "work” is the key.

The popular belief that *varṇa is determined by birth* is, in fact, not aligned with this Sanātanic truth. Originally, the system was simple and fluid:

- The one who taught and upheld knowledge was a brāhmaṇa,
- The one who protected and led was a kṣatriya,
- The one who traded and sustained economy was a vaiśya,
- And the one who served and supported was a śūdra.

This classification was never meant to create hierarchy, but to preserve balance and interdependence in society.

Can a Varṇa not be changed?

With the spread of the belief that varṇa is linked to birth, another idea also took root — that varṇa is permanent, and that a so-called *lower* varṇa is inherently inferior to a *higher* one.

But this idea too is not true.

There are several examples in our *itihāsa-granthas* (historical scriptures) that disprove this. For instance, in the *Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa*, we find the story of Sage Viśvāmitra, who was originally a king, a kṣatriya, but through intense tapas and inner transformation, he became a ṛṣi, and eventually earned the revered title of Brahmarṣi (*brahma + ṛṣi*).

Another example comes from the *Mahābhārata*: Vidura, one of the wisest voices of his time, was born to a dāsī (servant woman), yet he was welcomed into the Kuru family and given a place of great respect in the royal court — solely due to his wisdom and righteousness.

There are many such examples throughout our history, which clearly show that varṇa was originally a matter of *guṇa* (inner quality) and *karma* (action), not *janma* (birth).

Śūdras and the Idea of Impurity

Another widely spread belief is that **śūdras are impure**, but this, too, is **not true**.

The **12th mantra of the Puruṣasūkta** from the *Ṛgveda* does mention that the **śūdra** was born from the **legs (pāda)** of the Puruṣa — the Cosmic Being, the eternal God. Similarly, many *Purāṇas* also state that the śūdras emerged from the **feet of Bhagavān**.

But here's the contradiction:
The *Purāṇas* also declare that from the **lotus feet of Bhagavān**, the sacred **Gaṅgā** emerged — a river worshipped as pure and liberating (*pāvanī*).

So if the **Gaṅgā**, born from the divine feet, is considered *śuddha* (pure and holy), then how can someone **else** born from the same divine feet be considered *aśuddha* (impure)?
What kind of logic is that?

Moreover, in Hindu culture, the **feet are highly revered** — whether they belong to **Gods**, **Gurus**, or **elders**. Touching their feet is an act of humility and honor. So how can one say that a person born from those very feet is impure?

This contradiction reveals that the association of impurity with śūdras is not a Sanātanic truth, but a **later distortion** of sacred symbolism.

Were Śūdras Allowed to Chant the Vedas?

It is often said that **śūdras had no right (adhikāra)** to study or chant the **Vedas**. But this claim does not hold true in light of certain Vedic mantras themselves.

In the **Yajurveda (2nd Kāṇḍa)**, a mantra clearly mentions:

> “May this Veda-vāṇī (Vedic speech) be auspicious for the **brāhmaṇa**, **kṣatriya**, **vaiśya**, and **śūdra**.”

This statement explicitly includes **śūdras** in its blessing suggesting that they too were envisioned as **recipients and participants** in the sacred vibration of the Veda. If śūdras were truly excluded from Vedic knowledge, why would the **Veda itself** invoke **śubha** (auspiciousness) for them through its mantras?

This strongly implies that **śūdras too had the adhikāra** — the right to **hear, understand, and even recite** the Vedas, especially in the **early Sanātanic framework**, before exclusionist codes like certain smṛtis hardened the system.

A Śūdra in the Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa

In the *Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa*, specifically in the *Uttarakāṇḍa*, there is a well-known episode where Bhagavān Rāma is said to have killed a **śūdra named Śambūka**, who was performing **tapa**.

Now, while the **authenticity of the Uttarakāṇḍa** is debated by many scholars, we will not enter that discussion here. What we **can** observe, however, is that those who quote this episode to claim that **śūdras were prohibited from spiritual practices** ignore an equally important point:

Śabarī, too, was a **śūdra woman**, living alone in the forest, performing her own spiritual sādhana, yet **Lord Rāma blessed her,** and gave her **mokṣa** with deep affection and reverence.

So the question arises:
If being a śūdra and performing tapas was truly unacceptable, **why was Śabarī revered, while Śambūka was punished?**

Śūdras in Dharmaśāstra

Though the word **"śūdra"** is often associated with inferiority today, its **original root** tells a different story.

The term **"śūdra"** is said to come from the Sanskrit root **"śuc" (□□□□)**, which means **pure,** this connects the word *śūdra* with **purity** or **inner longing**, not impurity or inferiority.

However, in the **dharmaśāstra literature**, the word **"śūdra"** is often taken to mean a **mūḍhamati** , someone considered **foolish, dull-witted**, or **lacking independent reasoning**.

Because of this, śūdras are given **numerous behavioral rules and restrictions** in these texts. They are portrayed as **easily influenced**, and therefore not trusted with autonomy in spiritual or societal matters.

The word **"śūdra"** thus carries **two contrasting meanings**:

1. **Rooted in “śuc”** — it implies *purity, sorrow, or longing*.

2. **Used in dharmaśāstras** — it implies *low intellect or unfitness for spiritual independence*.

This **shift in meaning** reflects how the term was **redefined over time**, turning a possibly neutral or even dignified word into a marker of **social control** and **hierarchical bias**.

But earlier, as we saw, śūdras were never stopped from learning, hearing, or practicing truth — because that was the only way for them to become a ‘brāhmaṇa’.

In the Sanātanic view, **brāhmaṇatva was not a birthright, but a state of inner transformation** through jñāna (knowledge), tapa (discipline), and satkārma (noble actions).